

Sūrah Mā‘ūn

Relationship with Preceding and Succeeding Sūrahs

In the previous pair of *sūrahs* – Fīl and Quraysh – it is explained that the tribe of Quraysh has been blessed with the favours of peace and sustenance because of the Baytullāh (the House of God). These blessings should have induced them to worshipp the Lord of this Sacred House with all sincerity and should have striven to fulfil the objective for which it was built and given in their custody. In the succeeding pair of *sūrahs*, – Mā‘ūn and Kawthar – the characters of the Quraysh chiefs is initially depicted who at the time of revelation of these *sūrahs* were the overseers and custodians of the Baytullāh. It is subsequently asserted that they are no longer fit to be the trustees of this exalted House. They have grossly failed to carry out the assignment and deserve to be deposed from this prestigious position, which will now be handed over to those worthy of it.

In this particular *sūrah*, the petty character of a leader of the Quraysh is portrayed. The portrayal includes a strong element of amazement, in fact hate and disgust, on his attitude of callously driving away orphans. This attitude clearly reflects his disbelief in the Day of Judgement. Although the person is not addressed by name, yet it is quite evident that Abū Lahab’s character is under discussion. It was he who at the time of revelation of the *sūrah* had all the financial resources of the Baytullāh under his sole control. A depiction of the characters of the people follows who, though, apparently offer their prayers in the Baytullāh, yet their prayers lack spirit and devotion and are in fact a show of pretence on their part. A person who is not sincere in his relationship with his Creator can never be a well-wisher of his fellow beings. He will always be a miser in his dealings and will never have the heart to even lend small items of general use, not to speak of spending in the way of Allah.

It should be kept in mind that the Baytullāh had been built for two reasons. Firstly, to be the centre of worship of the one and only God; and secondly, to cater for the needs, physical as well as emotional, of the orphans and the poor. It was the duty of its custodians to carry out these tasks. But since the individuals whose unworthy characters are depicted cannot be expected to fulfil the duty, the next *sūrah* – Kawthar – decides their fate once and for all.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالذِّينِ (١) فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدْعُ الْيَتِيمَ (٢) وَلَا يُحِضُّ عَلَى طَعَامِ
 الْمُسْكِينِ (٣) فَوَيْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ (٤) الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ (٥) الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاؤُونَ
 (٦) وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ (٧)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Have you seen the one who belies reward and punishment?! He it is who drives away the orphan, and urges not the feeding of the poor. (1-3)

So devastation be to these who pray, who are indifferent to their prayer; who put on a pretentious display, and are stingy even in ordinary items of common use. (4-7)

Explanation

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالذِّينِ (١)¹

The word أَرَأَيْتَ is used to engage the attention of a reader by expressing surprise and dislike at the attitude of a person or a group of persons. The word الذِّين here means “reward and punishment” as in مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ (٣:١) (the Master of the Day of Judgement).

The antecedent of the conjunctive pronoun الَّذِي (he who) is not stated, but the context readily indicates that Abū Lahab’s character is being symbolized. He was an extremely rich yet stingy person, who was in charge of the *rifādah* or the treasury of the Baytullāh at the time of revelation of this *sūrah*. His mean personality and his ultimate destruction are depicted in a complete *sūrah* – *Lahab*. It will become evident from a study of that *sūrah* that he considered the *rifādah* as his own property and consumed its funds for personal purposes, and had thereby become the Qārūn of Makkah. Here, it is actually intended to point out his hard-heartedness that no good can be expected from such a ruthless person who drives away orphans in spite of being assigned to their welfare, but the style adopted is such that it unfolds his internal nature that is actually the cause of this callousness.

The adjective يُكَذِّبُ بِالذِّينِ (denier of reward and punishment) highlights his inner self. A person who denies the Day of Judgement cannot have any motivation to expend his wealth in the path of God to please Him as well as to secure the welfare and well-being of his fellow

1. Have you seen the one who belies reward and punishment?!

brethren. Such a person can only “drain his wealth” for his own self or to put up a false show of concern for the poor. Only a true belief in the Final Day can induce a person to spend on the deprived without having a vested self-interest. This fact has also been highlighted in Sūrah Layl:

فَأَمَّا مَنْ أَعْطَى وَاتَّقَى وَصَدَّقَ بِالْحُسْنَى فَسَنِيَّ لَهُ لِلْيسْرِ وَأَمَّا مَنْ بَخِلَ وَاسْتَغْنَى
وَكَذَّبَ بِالْحُسْنَى فَسَنِيَّ لَهُ لِلْعُسْرَى (٩٢: ٥-١٠)

As for him who gives and fears [the Lord] and testifies to a good fate, We shall smooth out an easy way for him. But he who is a greedy miser and is heedless [to the Day of Judgement] and testifies to a bad fate, We shall indeed smooth out for him the path of hardships. (92:5-10)

فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدْعُ الْيَتِيمَ²

دَع means “to push and shove”, as is used in Sūrah Tūr:

يَوْمَ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعًّا (١٣: ٥٢)

On that day, they shall be sternly shoved in the fire of Hell. (52:13)

According to the Qur'ān, orphans should be treated with regard and respect. It rebukes those who disregard them:

كَلَّا بَلْ لَا تُكْرِمُونَ الْيَتِيمَ (١٧: ٨٩)

Nay, you honour not the orphans. (89:17)

In an Islamic society, as the caliph Abū Bakr (rta) once said, the weak are the strongest and the most influential unless they are given their rights. Hence, every person of a society is required to deeply respect the people who are yet to receive their rights. Every Muslim who has a sense of honour in him should uphold their cause and strive to obtain their rights for them.

وَلَا يَحْضُ عَلَى طَعَامِ الْمَسْكِينِ³

This verse restates in a negative sense what is said above. It says that a person who maltreats orphans is the last one who would urge others to sympathize with them. Psychologically, every miser wishes to hide his

2. He it is who drives away the orphan

3. And urges not the feeding of the poor.

miserliness by desiring his fellow-beings to follow in his footsteps so that there is no one who can call him a miser. Consequently, any person who, contrary to his wishes, spends on the poor becomes a target of his jeers and taunts which are meant to discourage him from indulging in this “wasteful activity” in the very beginning, as is pointed out in Sūrah Humazah.

It should be kept in mind that, as indicated before, the character of the person who controlled and directed the welfare department for the poor of the Baytullāh is portrayed here. In other words, it is implied that when a thief assumes the seat of a judge, the result is not difficult to predict.

فَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُصَلِّينَ (٤) الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ (٥)⁴

The verse points out the lack of purity and devotion in the prayer of the religious pundits of the Baytullāh. Since they have to maintain their religious and social standings as the custodians of the Baytullāh, they put up a false show of worship in front of the general masses. Such a show certainly cannot instil in them the real spirit of worship, which becomes nothing but a matter of fooling the public.

It should be borne in mind that the real purpose for which the Baytullāh was built was the establishment of the prayer. Abraham (sws) settled his son Ishmael (sws) in its vicinity to enable himself and his progeny to establish this institution of worship. For this very purpose, he had also prayed to the Almighty to grant them peace and sustenance in that land. His humble invocation to the Almighty is cited in the Qur'ān as follows:

رَبَّنَا إِنِّي أَسْكَنْتُ مِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي بِوَادٍ غَيْرِ ذِي زَرْعٍ عِنْدَ بَيْتِكَ الْمُحَرَّمِ رَبَّنَا لِيُقِيمُوا
الصَّلَاةَ (١٤:٣٧)

O our Lord! I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near your Sacred House; in order, our Lord! that they may establish regular prayer. (14:37)

How Ishmael (sws) fulfilled this obligation, the Qur'ān itself testifies:

وَكَانَ يَأْمُرُ أَهْلَهُ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَكَانَ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ مَرْضِيًّا (١٩:٥٥)

He used to enjoin the prayer and *zakāh* on his people. (19:55)

Even in later times, when sorcerers and innovators held sway in the

4. So devastation be to these who pray, who are indifferent to their prayer.

land, the institutions of prayer and *zakāh* continued, though they became completely distorted and disfigured. How the directive of *zakāh* had been mutilated is pointed out above. What fate the prayer reached is mentioned in Sūrah Anfāl as follows:

وَمَا كَانَ صَلَاتُهُمْ عِنْدَ الْبَيْتِ إِلَّا مُكَاءٌ وَتَضْيِئَةٌ فَدُوفُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ
تَكْفُرُونَ (٣٥:٨)

Their prayer at the Baytullāh is nothing but whistling and clapping of hands. (8:35)

Even in this distorted shape, these rituals continued to exist, and just as the leaders of every period put up a display of religiosity to feign austerity, the leaders of the Quraysh too on special occasions upheld these practices. This verse actually upbraids such unworthy persons as are unaware of the real essence of the prayer by sounding a severe warning to them.

الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَآؤُونَ (٦) وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ (٧)⁵

This verse further delineates their show of false pretence. In fact, it asserts two reasons behind the lack of purity and devotion in their prayers: pretentiousness and miserliness.

Purity and sincerity of intention is the essence of prayers, that is they should be offered just to please the Almighty and to win His favour and affection. If they are offered for any other motive, they lose their purpose, and in fact become detrimental to their very cause. The prayer of the custodians of the Baytullāh had become adulterated not only with their ill-beliefs but also, as indicated before, with their false intentions. Quite evidently, such a prayer is nothing more than a theatrical enactment. Just as impersonating a character in a drama does not actually make a person one of them, likewise people who feign the articles of prayer do not become true worshippers.

Moreover, their miserliness too is an ample proof of the perfunctory nature of their prayer. The real spirit behind the prayer is a feeling of gratitude to the Almighty. A person who is grateful to his Creator can never be a miser or a skinflint. Instead, he is bound to be unselfish and magnanimous. He spends on the deprived and needy, not as a favour on them but because they have a rightful claim on his own wealth. In fact, he is so overwhelmed with this sense of gratitude that fulfilling others'

5. Those who put on a pretentious display, and are stingy even in ordinary items of common use.

needs even at his own expense is a source of tremendous satisfaction to him. From the point of view of the philosophy of religion also, prayer and spending in the way of God have a deep relationship; for the prayer is the foremost manifestation of the feeling of gratitude, and such a prayer subsequently motivates a person to spend on the needy. It can be safely said that the whole edifice of the *sharī'ah* is based on these two pillars of faith.

Consider next the verse *يَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ*: *مَاْعُوْن* means items of common use. It is perfectly in accordance with the norms of social relationships to borrow such items from a neighbour. Many a time such needs arise and it is but natural to ask for such things in close associations. Borrowing and lending such items is in fact a sign of a healthy social set-up and promotes ties of friendship and fraternity between people. Every decent person should be happy to help out his neighbour if at any time he needs for example a knife, a cooking pot, bedding items or even a matchbox. Only mean people can refuse assistance on such occasions. Also, whenever such mean and niggardly people pray, they do only to impress others because they have no inner motivation for it. Neither does such a prayer influence their hearts. In fact, ostentation in such a sacred affair increases their callousness

Some people, because of the words “So devastation be to these who pray ...” maintain that the *sūrah* was revealed in Madīnah. They contend that such people who used to pretend righteousness could not have existed in Makkah, and must be regarded as a product of the later Madi#nan period. The reason behind this misconception is that they consider the prayer mentioned here as the one obligated by Islam, whereas it implies, as this writer has explained above, the prayer whose establishment had been ordained by the Almighty to the prophet Ishmael (sws) and his progeny along with the directive of building the Baytullāh. This prayer was adopted and offered in later tines, though it lost its original form and shape because of innovations, which over the years gained a stronghold in the religious thought of the Arabs.
